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ABSTRACT

This brochure discusses strategies that parents can use to support the interests of their children and how to recognize and extend their children's talents. Parents are urged to: (1) be aware of what their child likes to do and be patient with the changing patterns as the child explores areas of interests and strengths; (2) help to find a positive role model for the child, someone with whom the child can relate and who can provide additional information about a selected topic; (3) look for sources of information via schools, colleges and universities, libraries, and the Internet; and (4) remember that an important focus of exploring interest should be enjoyment. Questions are provided that parents may want to discuss with their child for developing a particular talent and strategies are included for helping children with multiple talents. Strategies designed to develop interest in gifted children include providing children with a variety of experiences, helping the child develop skills to successfully pursue an interest, facilitating development of possible projects, and realizing the importance of an appreciative audience for the child's work. (CR)

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What Parents Need To Know about... Recognizing and Encouraging Interests, Strengths, and Talents of Gifted Elementary School Children.

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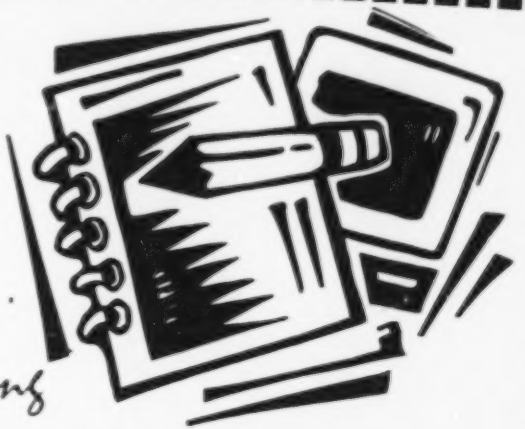

Recognizing and Encouraging Interests, Strengths, and Talents of Gifted Elementary School Children

by Marcia A. B. Delcourt

Once our children reach school age, they are not only introduced to new learning opportunities, but also to many competing interests. As we watch our children grow, they learn to make their own decisions about what they need to do and what they enjoy doing.

During elementary school, our children want to explore new ideas, but they also look to us for guidance and support. What can we do to recognize and develop their interests, strengths, and talents over time? This guide includes some commonly asked questions by parents, along with responses and additional resources.

The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented
Practitioners' Guide A9819

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Elementary School Gifted Children

Do children maintain their early interests once they reach school age?

Some of us are still interested in the activities we loved as young children. That early rock collection may have developed into a lifelong commitment to the study of geology. Childhood sketchbooks filled with cartoon figures, portraits of friends, and drawings of landscapes may have developed into a hobby or even a career as an artist. However, interests often change over time. Many of us have drawers, closets, or even garages containing artifacts that represent the hobbies we began and left behind, at least for now. Children also have interests that may last for many years or be dropped for a variety of reasons.

Why do interests change? A common reason is that the motivation for an interest varies. It may be that a fourth grader wants someone's attention and so becomes interested in the same topic as a best friend or a favorite relative. When this role model isn't around, the child might become disinterested in the topic because the interaction with that particular person is no longer available. A child might also become overwhelmed by a hobby or project and have trouble sustaining interest in several aspects of the topic. For instance, a child may love to play a sport, but finds memorabilia about the sport boring because these items require special care. Collections require a degree of organization, a skill that some children may not yet have acquired. On the other hand, some children are very organized and love the details of collecting items related to an interest. A parent might think that this means the child likes all facets of the topic. The result: a well-intentioned parent may place a son or daughter on a little league team when the child just wanted to collect baseball cards. One of the best ways to be supportive of your child is to find out what he or she enjoys about a particular topic. Also find out the other side of the picture and ask what your child doesn't like about his or her interests. It's difficult to keep practicing on the piano when you don't like the selection of songs you are asked to play or to ice skate when you can't find a pair of skates to fit just right.

Many problems can be overcome if you talk about them and work at finding satisfactory solutions. Naturally, you want to find a variety of ways to be supportive. You could help your child by finding clubs or interest groups to get more information about the topic. When a child shows some commitment to an activity, it is often because he or she has a strength in an area related to the

topic. For example, a child with an interest in science is curious about why and how things happen. You may hear questions such as: How did people first discover the world was round? Why can't sounds be heard as well under water as they are in the air? Is there another way that you can reach someone on the phone without using electricity? These questions show a strength in trying to place events in a logical sequence and to understand a phenomenon. In another example, a child with a strength in art might be able to depict the same character in different mediums such as a pencil drawing, a clay sculpture, and a collage, thus, demonstrating flexibility in visualizing and representing a figure. These early interests give a child experience with a particular topic that can be used when he or she encounters the same subjects in the future or these pursuits could lead to more commitment on the part of the child, representing a deeper area of interest and the development of a strength.

It is of great value to share an interest with others who appreciate it in the same way. Help your child find out about clubs, associations, newsletters, local hobbyists, and other organizations related to the same topic. Even if the people or organizations are not located in your region, letters or e-mail messages could help your child stay in contact with others who are involved in the same interest area. Since many public libraries are connected to the Internet, a reference librarian could assist you and your child to locate potential sources of information.

Children are also likely to change their minds about interests as they meet other children and gain new perspectives, making it hard to find the time for old activities. It's okay for them to move from one idea to another because that's how they will find out what they really want to do. As they try out new activities, a simple word of advice is to stay within your family budget when funding an interest. Rent or borrow necessary equipment before buying it and try to find out the motive for your child's newly found passion. It may be an interest based on a strength or it could just be an area of exploration that is soon to be replaced by another diversion.

We want to encourage interests and further develop our children's strengths. One of the best ways to do this is to be sure your child knows you value his or her ideas. Get involved by reading the same material, engaging in conversations about the topic, and finding a positive role model who is also interested in the topic. A role model could be a local high school student who is willing to share his or her enthusiasm for mathematics with your child, a music store owner who will practice drumming techniques with your son or daughter, or a retired librarian eager to recount numerous stories about the history of your town with a curious third grader. Whoever the resource might be, many highly creative and inventive adults report that there was at least one significant person who influenced their lives and their decision to follow certain paths of exploration and development (Gardner, 1993).

To facilitate and support your elementary school child's interests:

- be aware of what your child likes to do and be patient with the changing patterns as your son or daughter explores areas of interests and strengths.
- help to find a positive role model for your child; this is someone with whom your child can relate and an individual who can provide additional information about the selected topic.
- look for sources of information via schools, colleges and universities, libraries, and the Internet.
- remember that an important focus for exploring interests should be enjoyment.

What if my child doesn't have any interests?

A common lament among children is "I don't have anything to do." If this statement is changed to a series of questions, some answers become possible. What can I do? What do I know how to do? What do I like to do? What can I do well? What is my favorite activity? What would I like to learn how to do? To elaborate on the responses to these questions, a survey could be completed by a child to find out where his or her strengths and interests lie. The *Interest-A-Lyzer* for elementary school children (Renzulli, 1997) offers many opportunities for a child to express what he or she would like to do by asking questions such as "You are a famous author about to write your next book, what will it be about? Imagine that you can travel to any time in history. Where would you go? Have you ever made up a new game? Tell about it here." Responses to these and many other questions can help your child identify areas that are already strengths and locate new topics of interest.

You could choose an idea from the *Interest-A-Lyzer* and look for related presentations at your local library or select books that explain how to get involved with the topic. By introducing your child to a variety of ideas, it is more likely that he or she will be able to select an area of interest. Once your child focuses on a particular area such as poetry, chemistry, bird watching, or cars, your child should find out the skills needed to pursue this topic. Beginning questions can include: How do writers get their ideas for a poem? What equipment do I need to conduct a chemistry experiment? How can I identify the birds in my yard? What steps should I take to design a blueprint for a car?

In another example, a trip to the library or to a museum for a child interested in art can easily lead to a fascination with a certain artistic style such as that of M. C. Escher, a Dutch painter and printmaker who lived from 1898 to 1972. His drawings and paintings

of visual illusions appear in museums as well as on Dutch currency and stamps (Bool, Kist, Locher, & Wierda, 1982; Ernst, 1976). Children can also use basic geometry to make their own artwork with the book *Creating Escher-Type Drawings* (Ranucci & Teeters, 1977) or the software *Escher Interactive: Exploring the Art of the Infinite* (1996).

Once interested in a topic, children enjoy making their own projects or conducting investigations. They could design an art gallery at school or at a local business in order to display their Escher-type paintings. They might also conduct a survey to find out the type of art that other students in their school like the best (Delcourt, 1989). Two excellent books for developing young researchers are *Looking for Data in All the Right Places* (Starko & Schack, 1992) and *Chi Square, Pie Charts and Me* (Baum, Gable, & List, 1987).

To develop interests in your child:

- provide your son or daughter with a variety of experiences to give him or her the opportunity to try many activities.
- help your child develop the necessary skills to successfully pursue an interest beyond an introductory phase.
- facilitate the development of possible projects and outlets for your child's interest such as writing a book, maintaining an art portfolio, or documenting and displaying science experiments.
- realize the importance of an appreciative audience for your child's work by placing a copy of a completed book in a school library, organizing a club for students of all ages to share art techniques, or submitting a description of a science project to a children's magazine.

How can I develop my elementary school child's talent?

When people hear the word "talent," they often think of an artistic area of expression such as drawing or playing a musical instrument. We also refer to people as being talented athletes or talented scientists. Most experts agree that talent refers to some natural ability based on an area of strength. Many experts also believe that both the child's personality and the types of opportunities available in the environment over a period of time play a large role in the development of a talent (Bloom, 1985; Sosniak, 1997).

Some children already enter school showing signs of talent in one or more areas (Delcourt, 1998). Other children might display a talent as they encounter new experiences throughout their elementary school years. A fifth grader who has developed an artistic style, using certain soft colors to depict city-scapes and fantasy scenes, is developing talent in art and visual/spatial sensibility. This child is also recognized by classmates as an artist and readily recognizes that art brings out a sophistication in his own personality. The child chooses activities that will enhance this talent and organizes his art work categorically and chronologically. Such a talent is being nurtured by the parents and teachers on a daily basis through a special class provided at the public school. A third grade girl who adores mathematics wakes her parents up in the middle of the night because she just can't sleep, her mind is so full of numbers and mathematics problems. She wants to "do math" at 3 a.m.! Her talent in numerical reasoning allows her to make many calculations in her head. She constantly wants to be challenged and, therefore, has been assessed and placed in a fifth grade mathematics class. The rest of her school program is with her same-age peers.

If you are uncertain about whether a skill is advanced for your child's age, you could consult a reference about child development, ask your pediatrician, or seek advice from teachers and other professionals in your community. If you believe your daughter or son displays a talent, keep a journal of your child's accomplishments. Be sure to date these projects such as artwork, writing samples, or an inventor's log, as well as quotes of your child's comments and insights. Also accumulate your child's work in a portfolio. Boxes, envelopes, or file folders can be used for this purpose. A portfolio is helpful when you are explaining your child's abilities to a classroom teacher or to someone who

specializes in the talent area. By viewing your collected material, they will be able to give you the best advice about how to develop your child's talent.

Because talents as well as interests can be expensive to support, you need to consider time, resources, and level of commitment. Your child should be motivated to continue with the development of a talent area before you both proceed. You can contact your school or local organizations to find out about people in the community who practice the talent. A local college might have someone in the mathematics, science, music, art, or language department willing to talk to you and your child about the steps needed to continue developing a particular talent area. Other professionals in the community could also be resources. For example, if a student loves to write, a teacher may be able to contact an author who would be willing to speak to your child as well as to a group of other children at your school. Many such activities could help your child learn about how different professionals originally became acquainted with their talents, where they went to school, how they get their ideas, and what tools they use for their work. When your child has an area of strength, it is worthwhile pursuing its development because of the present and future satisfaction you can all have from a talent area nurtured at a pace that is comfortable for your child.

If your child is talented in an academic area, you should contact his or her teacher to discuss specific abilities you have noted and to develop an appropriate educational program. "Successful programs challenge students through high level content and pacing of the curriculum, while providing many opportunities for these students to make their own choices and to have control over their learning environments" (Delcourt, 1995).

To facilitate and support your child's talents:

- be patient with your child when you see potential talent; in most people who have been recognized for their talent, the skills and personality to pursue that area have developed over a long period of time.
- be aware that children who show initial strength in an area such as mathematics, music, or art, might not be interested in practicing the skills related to this area; help them to enjoy the topic first and the talent may develop later.
- recognize that children who show precocity in an area should receive attention in that area to further the development of their skills and should also be engaged in a variety of other activities.
- compile a portfolio of your child's work, documenting his or her talent over a period of time.

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